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ORAL ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF SOCIALIZATION

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Oral English needs no defense; it is the demand of the hour. We no longer believe that good English diction can be taught only through the written theme. But oral English as a socializing factor, as a means of establishing some connection between the life of the class and the life of the outside world, seems to be a much less familiar idea. The working plan submitted is by no means a suggested remedy or panacea for all English ills, but it has this to recommend it: it is not a desk-made theory, it has grown out of actual classroom conditions; and, further, in practice it has proved a means of getting measurable results in this matter of joining the interests of the school and the interests of the community, with certain by no means negligible by-products.

The following is the plan in detail. The first ten minutes of each English class period is set aside for the oral work of one pupil and the criticism of this work. At the beginning of the period, the pupil to whom the assignment has been made for the day stands before the class and gives his theme. If he wishes he may use brief notes, but he is not encouraged to continue the practice. He has had at least two weeks for preparation and has been left in no doubt as to just what is expected of him. It has been explained to the class that this is a substitute for one written theme, that it is an important piece of work, and that it will be corrected and graded with care; further, that every rule governing written composition applies to oral composition, and for this reason very careful preparation is insisted upon. The theme is to be studied and worked through until the thought is perfectly clear, but only the outline is to be committed. After the oral composition has been given, members of the class discuss it, giving their own opinion and feeling very frankly.

The teacher then continues the criticism, always constructive criticism, showing where and how the work might have been improved, but especially emphasizing the best points, calling attention to what has been good, pointing out to the class a well-constructed paragraph, a good figure of speech or illustration, an effective transition sentence, or a good method for securing unity; in short, all of what has been commendable in his work. It is true, the rambling, incoherent paragraph, the crude expression, the incorrect sentence, must not pass by unnoticed. Mistakes must be corrected, but not with too great insistence or emphasis; for the pupil, even if this first attempt leaves much to be desired, must be made to feel that this recitation is an *achievement*. Whether the criticism leaves the pupil encouraged and determined to make his next theme meet all the requirements will depend largely upon the teacher's attitude. In this connection, generous appreciation is invaluable; in fact, it is a quite indispensable incentive.

If this daily drill on the essentials of good English composition had nothing to recommend it but the improvement that results in both oral and written composition, it would be amply justified. But a more vital consideration is the assignment of subject. If we keep in mind the main purpose of this plan, namely, the use of oral English as a connecting link, a cementing factor between the interests of the school and the life of the community, it will not be difficult to see that the question of subjects is most significant. Personally, I may be interested in "The Development of the English Novel," "The Technique of Certain Verse Forms," "The Influence of Moving Pictures on Life and Literature"—but my pupils are not! Why insist that they assume an interest which in the very nature of the case cannot be genuine? Only from the rich experience can come a real response to the appeals of a literary subject. So if "The Heating System of Our New Municipal Building" is a more live and vital subject to these boys and girls than "The Sussex of Kipling," why not utilize an interest that does not have to be induced, "worked up" for the occasion?

To illustrate further. The most literary girl in the Senior class gave an oral theme on "The New South Side Steam Laundry," a description and exposition, and the class listened with a

spontaneous absorbed attention which they could not have given to a theme on "The Striking Qualities of Masfield's Verse." "The Process of Manufacturing Steel Drills" does not interest me profoundly. To the subject itself I am not indebted for a single thrill. The thrill came, however, in the effect produced upon the class by this very theme. The sixteen-year-old boy who gave it had spent several periods outside of regular school hours placing drawings on the board to illustrate his work—not at my suggestion, not at all, but because he actually wanted to do it. He brought with him for further illustration several pictures, what seemed to me an odd assortment of bits of metal, and a finished drill, and all of this material was used very effectively in explaining the different processes through which the raw material must pass from the first step to the finished product. The theme was a good, though not faultless, example of exposition; but this is the point: it awakened a real enthusiasm in the class, an alert, eager-eyed, leaning-forward type of attention very different from the usual languid interest in a theme subject. The response to the admiration of the speaker for the "shop that could put out the best steel drill in the country" was immediate and unmistakable. "Here, at last," they seemed to say, "is something we can get at."

Now since in my experience no theme on a subject related to literature had ever awakened such a spontaneous, vivid response, I decided to experiment further with subjects of the same type; that is, subjects dealing not only with things concrete, definite, tangible, but of interest and value in the real life of the community.

I had fully decided, as I have said, to experiment with this same type of subject—but no announcement of this plan was made to the class. It is better to give the pupils an opportunity to set and solve their own problems, to participate in whatever plans may be afoot, to seem, at least, to originate, develop, and carry on the whole project. What pupils need increasingly is an opportunity for real experience, for participation. By what other means can they learn to think things through, to plan, to execute, to "carry on?" So it is a part of the teacher's business to see to it that the project, of whatever nature, becomes *their* affair, and that the

class assumes the responsibility. Hence the following type of assignment:¹

Occasion: Meeting of the class to choose a general subject for the second term's work in oral English.

New Pupil: But couldn't you give us a subject for this term's work?

Teacher: O dear, no! The teacher doesn't give subjects. What subject does the class want?

Class: (No immediate response.)

Teacher: What subject or subjects in the last term's work did you find most interesting?

John (without a moment's hesitation): I liked the one on "The Manufacture of Steel Drills" the best.

James: I thought that one was the most interesting, too. Charles was telling what he found out himself, and then his illustrations were so good.

Paul: I don't see why we couldn't take a subject of the same kind. Why couldn't we make a study of all the industries 'round here—make investigations and write 'em up, you know, just as Charles did. I think nearly everybody in the class liked his report best.

Teacher: Paul thinks nearly everybody in the class liked that subject best. How many of you did?

Class: (Almost unanimous response in favor of "steel drills.")

Teacher (only mildly interested): But there would scarcely be enough subjects of that type for the whole class!

Class: (Much whispered protest.)

David (much excited): Why, Miss R., the town's a regular industrial center; there are dozens of big plants here! Just look at what they're doing in the steel mills and the munition plants right now! Why, we could get twenty subjects out of one mill.

Alex: Huh! You wouldn't have to stick to the steel mills. What's the matter with the insulator factory? There's only four insulator factories in the world, or anyway in the United States, and one of them's right here.

Joseph (eagerly): There's the machine shops, the furniture factory and the woolen mills, and the chemical plant and the New Electric, and the Carbon Coal and Coke Works, and the Tool Works, and a lot of others. Couldn't we write up one of those?

Teacher (languidly): You might, perhaps, but I've been told it's very difficult to get into these great shops, especially when work is actually being done. (Four boys standing at the same time.)

Russell: My father's superintendent of the New Electric. There wouldn't be any trouble there.

John: Three of us fellows worked in the "New South" Steel Mill last vacation. We could get in there all right and get a permit for the others, too.

James: My uncle is foreman of the forge in the machine shops—he'd help us, I know.

¹ The work was done before Miss Rodkey moved to New York.

Ralph: I know a lot of fellows that are working in the munitions plant. I'll see them about how to get a study group in.

Teacher (*not openly opposed, but apparently still skeptical*): Some of the girls have been trying to get a chance to speak. Mary?

Mary: Superintendent A. promised to take our chemistry class through the new chemical laboratories, and I've been thinking we might get material for English at the same time.

Alice: My father often takes me with him through the woolen mills. I'm sure he'd let me bring some of the other girls.

Clarence: I know a member of the Board of Education—or rather, father does—who is one of the biggest stockholders in the North Side Steel plant. If we were to write to him why we want to go, I believe he'd give us a permit.

(Teacher thinks this might be worth trying and is almost convinced that the difficulty in getting admission to plants might be overcome by a class of sufficient spirit.)

Teacher: But have you thought of the extra time this work will require? Not only for the investigation, the study of the process, but for the preparing of notes and outlines, the organizing of your material, getting material for illustration, drawings, and the like? Charles, I know, spent many extra days in working up his report.

Class (*eagerly*): How about Saturdays?

Teacher: O very well! If you really *want* this subject—how many of you do?

Class: (*Response unanimous and enthusiastic.*)

Captain of the football team: I think we'd have to organize the class for a study like this. Not everybody has a relation in the works to hand out a permit to him, and somebody in the class would be sure to miss the chance—I mean, to get into a plant to make the study.

Class President (*loftily*): Of course we'd have to organize. Elect a captain for each group, or something like that. We can do it in our class meeting this afternoon.

Teacher: What about the new pupils in the class, and some of the younger pupils, or those who have never had any experience in work of this kind, who would hardly know what to look for, even if they had the chance to go through one of these great plants?

William: The fellows that have been there before could be the guides—tell the others, you know, what to expect, or what to look for.

Helen (president of the Dramatic Club): I think the new pupils and the more timid members of the class should have some help in getting the work started, especially the girls who have never tried anything like this before. They should be put in groups with the older ones, or with those who have had more experience.

After further discussion, teacher and class approve of this plan.

Teacher, aided by suggestions from pupils, writes on board: "*Subject for second term's work in oral English: 'A Study of Home Industries,'* based upon actual observation and study of a process from the beginning to the finished product. The purpose of this study is to report to the class something of value and of interest. It must be presented according to the 'rules of the game'—which means, among other things, in the very best English at our command."

In a very short time a long list of subjects had been selected and posted, such as the following: How Blankets Are Made; The Heating System in Our Schools; The Linotype in Operation; What the New Steel Mills Mean to Our Town; How Baskets Are Made; What I Learned from a Visit to the Chemical Works; How Brick is Made; What Scientific Farming Has Meant on the Farms; Our New Bakery—How Perfect Bread Is Made; Process of Manufacturing Railway Spring Tires; Three New Tools from the Tool Works; A Visit to the Coke Ovens; How War Munitions Are Manufactured; An Engineering Problem in the New Steel Plant; What I Learned at the Foundry; Market Gardening near R.; An Up-to-Date Steam Laundry; An Interesting Trip through the New Electric Plant; How Moving Pictures Are Produced. These and similar subjects were used in all the English classes.

I have already spoken of the interest in these subjects—in processes that could be observed, in tangible things that could be seen and investigated—and this interest grew from day to day. The pupils never seemed to tire of these subjects, and indeed many surprisingly good reports were brought to the class. The response was general through the whole English department. In a high school of twelve hundred pupils only two failed in this oral-theme work, and these were first-year pupils under the usual inexperienced Freshman teacher.

One valuable by-product of this socializing scheme was a very marked improvement in the mechanics of English composition. The daily brief but energetic drill on the essentials of good English diction brought results. For this brief period every day the attention of the class was focused upon some one much-to-be-desired essential—upon real excellence in sentence or paragraph structure,

upon the especially fitting phrase, or some touch of distinction in the vocabulary, until there grew up, very gradually, it is true, but perceptibly, some evidence of a sense of form and a feeling for appropriate expression.

These oral themes on industrial subjects covered approximately thirty recitations or six school weeks. The written theme assignment chosen for the same period was "The Men and Women Who Have Done the Most for Our Town in the Last Twenty-Five Years." At the same time that our industries were under school inspection, a discussion was going on in every home represented in the high school on what makes a man or woman worth while in his community. The pupils agreed to get material for this theme from people—not from some possible record, but from the folks at home, from neighbors and friends. Echoes from these home and school discussions were heard on the street corner, in the shop, in the clubs, in the Civic Association, in the Mother's Meeting, in the Ministerial League, in the Parent-Teacher's Association; and as an English department we found ourselves in the midst of the novel experience of being interested in precisely the same subject that the whole community was discussing. I need scarcely add that these themes were valuable aside from their importance as an exercise in English composition in that they revealed ideals, standards of judgment, ethical concepts. A crude reaction to values set by the community? Even so the value of the exercises was not minimized either as a unifying, correlating force between the life of the school and life outside of school, or as an exercise in training for citizenship.

For the second group of oral themes the subject chosen was "Living Men and Women Who Are Doing Things That Are Worth While." It was suggested by the class that many such men and women lived in our own town. Who were they? What were they doing? Why? And certainly there were many in the state and nation whose lives were worthy of careful study. Here the best of our current magazines should prove helpful. In one division of the Junior class the following subjects were chosen: Thomas Mott Osborne, Jane Addams, Colonel Goethals, Helen Keller, Anna Howard Shaw, Julia Marlowe, Mr. Louis Brandeis, Judge S. (local), Henry Ford, Luther Burbank, Ella Flagg Young, Lloyd

George, Our School Superintendent (local), Geraldine Farrar, Dr. Trudeau, Booker T. Washington, Bishop M. (local), A Captain of Industry (local), Study of a Distinguished Citizen (local), Russell H. Conwell, John McCormack.

The third assignment was on "Notable Movements of Our Own Time." We began with themes derived from the Boy Scouts, better roads movement, The Camp Fire Girls, Red Cross, pure food, play ground, community center, and the like, and ended with suffrage, the peace movement, and preparedness. In these three groups of oral-theme assignments, some phase of life as it now is with its vital interests and changing activities was brought before the class in theme and discussion.

As a part of this socializing campaign we later in the year invited a great many professional and business men and women of the town to come to the English department to give brief talks on their own line of work, and they came! Further, we established a real current literature department—not in the library, but in the English room, where we had practically all of the best periodicals, with enough copies of the *Independent* and the *Literary Digest* for the whole class. One period each week was devoted to the questions of the day, and a study of the events and problems of nation-wide and world-wide interest. Through this work the woman's clubs of the town discovered the English department, and the pupils discovered that the problems discussed in the classroom were identical with the problems of the larger life of the community in the world outside.

Before the end of the first year, we had an exhilarating sense of having become a part of the community. We were no longer a group set apart, absorbed in the academic, far removed from the issues of real life. We were a part of that life right now, in the present, in touch with things as they are. But from my point of view, the most golden result of all was that, having made this concession to the demands of the hour, and having attended faithfully to the matter of English composition, there was still left of each period a perfectly good forty minutes for the teaching of literature.